DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 136 924 PS 009 168

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TITLE A Naturalistic Study of Reciprocity in the Helping Behavior of Young Children.
PUB DATE Mar 77
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development (New Orleans, Louisiana, March 17-20, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Altruism; *Helping Relationship; Preschool Children; *Preschool Education; *Prosocial Behavior; Research; *Sex Differences; Social Relations; *Socioeconomic Influences

ABSTRACT

This study attempts to demonstrate factors governing reciprocity of helping behavior in nursery school children. A time sampling method with a pre-set 10 category system was used to record the psychological and task helping behavior of 19 preschool children (mean age 5 1/2 years) over a 2-month period. Each child also completed a sociometric status test and was rated on his relative helpfulness by two teachers. It was found that help given by children was reliably reciprocated by peers. Reciprocity was stronger when the recipient was liked by the giver than when the recipient was disliked. High sociometric status children received more help than they gave while low sociometric status children gave more help than they received. A negative relationship was found between sociometric status and both psychological and directed (solicited) help received. Helping behavior occurred primarily between same sex peers and consistent sex differences were found in favor of males on all observational measures of helping behavior. (Author/SB)

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A Naturalistic Study of Reciprocity in the Helping Behavior of Young Children

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PS 009168

Paper presented at the Biennial Convention of the Society for Research in Child Development, New Orelans, March, 1977

One does not have to search far in order to uncover the kinds of moral teachings about reciprocity that children hear often and learn by direct tuition and other means. "One good turn deserves another" and "do unto others as you would have them do unto you" are familiar phrases which exemplify a generalized norm or expectation that benefits given should at some point be repaid.

The sociological and social psychological literature has taken initial steps in the development of theory and has begun establishing research support for some initial propositions about the reciprocity process. Gouldner's theoretical examination, in 1960 of the "norm of reciprocity", which was framed, interestingly enough, in terms of helping behavior, has provided the most important guide for experimentation in the last 17 years. Gouldner stated that reciprocity was not an all or none principle governing social behavior but varied with the following factors: the "value of the benefit, and hence the debt is in proportion to and varies with - among other things - the intensity of the recipient's need at the time the benefit was bestowed (' a friend in need...'), the resources of the donor ('he gave although he could ill afford it'), the motives imputed to the donor ('without thought of gain') and the nature of the constraints which perceived to exist or be absent ('he gave of his own free will') "(p. 171).

A few laboratory experiments on various kinds of benevolent behavior have begun disentangling the variables which are likely to govern reciprocity while no naturalistic research studies have progressed beyond the point of supporting the general statement that benevolence reaps benevolence. The present study represents a naturalistic analog to laboratory experimentation which attempts to demonstrate some of the factors which govern reciprocity within a nursery

school classroom.

A time sampling method with a pre-set 10 category system was used to record the psychological and task helping behavior of 19 preschool children over a period of 2 months (mean age was 66.6 months). The category system used was a combination of coding systems used by Severy and Davis in 1971, and Hartup and Keller in 1960. It was further expanded on the basis of the coding of 157 anecdotes of helping behavior collected by Leiserson (1975) over a period of 1 year's time. Psychological helping behavior included "verbally defends", "physically defends", "gives warning", "verbally comforts or reassures", "physically comforts or reassures", and "helps out of distress". Task helping included "advises, suggests, directs", "informs of 3rd person's need", "offers instrumental help" and "gives instrumental help".

The observational codings were made by two sets of observers working in pairs throughout the experiment. Reliability correlations for the two pairs of observers for the entire experiment ranged from .74 to .96 for "total help" and "task help" given and received. The percentages of agreement for less frequently recorded psychological help received and given for both pairs of observers were respectively 68% and 63%. Percentages of agreement for directed or, in other words, solicited help given and received were 55% and 45% respectively. Teacher ratings correlated significantly and positively with direct observation measures of helping behaviors, adding validity support to the coding system here utilized.

Each child also completed a picture sociometric test (Moore & Updegraff, 1964) and was rated on his relative helpfulness by his two teachers on 10 bipolar, scalar items derived from the observational coding system.

The results indicated that the central hypothesis of reciprocity in children's helping behavior was supported by a correlation of .80 between total help given and total help received. Help given to teachers by the children was also reciprocated, the correlation here being .57. While the variable "total help" (given and received) was composed overwhelmingly of voluntarily given or non-directed help, "directed help" (given and received) was separated out for additional analysis. "Directed help given" correlated .00 with "directed help received" and .04 with "total help received". Thus when "total help", or predominantly voluntarily given help, was considered reciprocity was strongly evidenced, while when "directed help" was inspected, reciprocity was not in evidence. Lower reliability in the coding of "directed help" may have mitigated against finding such a relationship between help given and received.

The relationship between help given and received was also found to vary with the degree of liking for the recipients of the help as expressed by the children on the picture sociometric test. For each child, his relationships with all others in the class were categorized into 3 groups, those they liked, those they did not select as liked or disliked and those they disliked. The degree of reciprocity, the correlation between total help given and received for the three groups, respectively, were .87($p < .01$), .62 ($p < .01$) and .52 ($p < .05$). Reciprocity was thus strongest when the givers liked the recipients and weakest when the recipient was disliked ($Z = 2.16$, $p < .05$ for a 2 tailed test).

Homan's (1961) social exchange theory suggests that "the more valuable to a man a unit of activity another gives him, the more often he will emit

activity rewarded by the activity of the other" (p. 55). A corollary to this proposition, as applied to the present findings states that the "rate of exchange" of helping behavior should be proportional to the value others place on the help of the high and low sociometric status children and the value the high and low sociometric status children place on the help of the others.

In order to examine for possible discrepancies in the exchange of helping behaviors, the children were divided at the mean on the basis of their overall sociometric status scores (number of positive minus negative choices). A 2 X 2 analysis of variance with repeated measurement was performed on the variables sociometric status and direction of helping behavior (given or received). A two-way interaction between sociometric status and direction of helping behavior, at a marginal level of significance ($p < .07$), indicated that high sociometric status children received more help than they gave while low sociometric status children gave more help than they received. Children worked harder for the help of the high sociometric status children. Also, when both help given and received were combined, low sociometric status children were found to engage in greater helping behavior than high sociometric status children ($p < .01$).

Negative correlations between sociometric status and "psychological help received" and between sociometric status and "directed help received" were found to be -.55 and -.49 respectively. This confirms earlier findings by McCandless, et. al. (1961) who discovered that low sociometric status children exhibited greater emotional dependency than high sociometric status children, and Moore and Updegraff's (1964) findings of a negative correlation between sociometric status and affection and support seeking directed toward adults. Although teacher ratings of helping correlated positively with sociometric status, the correlations were not statistically significant.

Most helping behavior was found to occur between children of the same sex. Consistent, statistically significant differences were found in favor of males over females on 5 out of the 6 observational measures of helping benavior given and received. Differences in psychological help received were in this direction but did not reach statistical significance. At least three possible explanations for sex differences in favor of boys seem plausible. First, Maccoby and Jacklin (1974) have reviewed a great number of studies of sex differences and have concluded that males have been found to be more aggressive than females. Relating this to present findings, the suggestion here is that perhaps a certain level of assertiveness is required for helping to take place. Yarrow et.al. (1976) have recently suggested a complex relationship between aggression and prosocial behavior. Secondly, it is the author's impression that boys engaged in much more play with large wooden blocks, and that this activity, more than any other, elicited greater helping behavior. Future research needs to attend to the constraining or facilitating effects of tasks upon prosocial behavior. Finally, another of the author's impressions was that boys took part in greater rough and tumble play, and when someone was hurt either by their miscalculations (or even calculations) they were then close enough in location to lend a hand in remedying the damage both to objects and people.

In conclusion, research on the concept of reciprocity in helping behavior makes assumptions about the nature of kind acts toward others which appear different from those basic to the study of altruism. The concept of reciprocity opens up the possibility that one does not get something for nothing, as stated in the vernacular, and that a helper might even intend to create a debt by helping another, a debt which would require repayment later on. In view of the present findings, this obligation to repay a debt might be particularly binding if the giver considers you a friend and if the giver assists without

having to be asked. This is, perhaps, a more materialistic and less noble view of children's interpersonal behavior than the investigation of altruism might suggest.

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